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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MINSK 001061

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION COALITION SPLITTING AT THE SEAMS

REF: A. MINSK 848
[1](#)B. MINSK 862
[1](#)C. MINSK 978
[1](#)D. MINSK 795
[1](#)E. MINSK 1036
[1](#)F. MINSK 737
[1](#)G. MINSK 1018

Classified By: Ambassador Stewart for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) On September 25, several key parties within the United Democratic Forces (UDF) announced the formation of an independent &executive body8 to coordinate plans for the January 2007 municipal elections. In response to this latest development, UDF leader Aleksandr Milinkevich has stated in unambiguous terms that the coalition is splitting into two camps -- Milinkevich, Vintsyuk Vyachorka,s Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), and pro-democracy NGOs in one camp and Anatoly Lebedko,s United Civic Party (UCP), Sergey Kalyakin,s Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC), Aleksandr Kozulin,s Belarusian Social Democratic Party (&Gramada8) (BSDP), and Aleskandr Bukhvostov,s Belarusian Party of Labor (BPL) in the other camp. UDF members have reached an impasse on such issues as selection of candidates for the local elections, the need for a second democratic congress, and the restructuring of the UDF Political Council. To be sure, party leaders at the regional level are effectively preparing for the local elections and the Belarusian opposition remains committed to promoting democratic change, but no longer in a highly coordinated manner. End Summary.

Disgruntled Parties Form A Separate Committee

[1](#)2. (C) On September 25, the leaders of opposition parties United Civic Party (UCP), pro-democracy Party of Belarusian Communists (BPC), Belarusian Social Democratic Party (&Gramada8) (BSDP), and the unregistered Belarusian Party of Labor (BPL) announced the creation of an executive body to coordinate the campaigns of their respective parties ahead of the January 2007 municipal elections. Pol/Econ Chief met with UCP deputy Igor Shinkarik, BPC deputy Valery Ukhmalov, and BSDP acting head Vladimir Lavkovich on September 27 to discuss the reasons behind the formation of this coordinating body.

[1](#)3. (C) The disgruntled parties pointed to the September 21 meeting of the United Democratic Forces Political Council (PC), the supreme organ in the coalition, as the most recent example. According to participants in and observers of the PC meeting, Milinkevich and Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) leader Vyachorka traded &serious accusations8 with UCP

leader Lebedko and BPC leader Kalyakin on issues ranging from preparation for municipal election campaigns to the need for a second democratic congress. As a result, the leaders failed to make decisions on key issues on the agenda. The UCP, BPC, and BSDP leaders claimed that the contentious and unproductive September 21 PC meeting alone served as sufficient proof that an independent coordinating body needed to be established.

Two Blocks Forming Within Coalition?

¶4. (C) Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) deputy and UDF Executive Body (or Secretariat) Head Viktor Ivashkevich told Pol/Econ Chief on September 27 that he fears the split in the UDF will deepen if the member parties maintain their present courses. He has observed that Milinkevich, BPF, a few tiny unregistered political parties, and NGOs are pursuing one course of action and UCP, BPC, BSDP, and BPL are pursuing a separate course of action. The announcement of this coordinating body came as a shock to UDF leader Aleksandr Milinkevich and the BPF leadership, and they view the move as a threat to the sustainability of the opposition coalition. Milinkevich confirmed Ivashkevich's assessment when he said in a September 24 press interview that the state of affairs in the opposition is worse than it was before the presidential elections.⁸ In a September 28 press interview, Milinkevich conceded that there was a schism⁸ in the UDF and lamented that two opposition camps⁸ will be for preparing the municipal elections.

¶5. (C) Although UCP, BPC, and BSDP leaders insist that the newly established executive body falls within the framework of the UDF, these same leaders expressed their deep

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frustration with the perceived stagnation in the UDF and with Milinkevich's lackluster leadership. To be sure, the internal squabbling in the UDF at the national level is not new (refs A and B). In response to the perceived paralysis, opposition parties in several regions in Belarus have developed their own regional agreements, and a few of these regional coalitions include Milinkevich supporters, BPF, UCP, BPC, BSDP, and others (ref C). However, both UCP and BPF leaders have shared with us recently that the growing tensions among party leaders may undermine the relative high degree of cooperation among parties at the local level.

Issues of Contention

¶6. (C) Based on many discussions with opposition party leaders and civil society representatives, we have identified at least five sources of conflict in the UDF.

-- Selection of Local Election Candidates. Milinkevich and the BPF are in favor of the UDF regional coalitions selecting one UDF candidate per district in an effort to minimize partisan conflicts. UCP, BPC, and BPL support allowing all party candidates to run in a district, as the elections will inevitably be falsified and a greater number of candidates could broaden the opposition's base of popular support. UCP and BPC leaders noted that the newly formed coordinating body will allow the regional coalitions to develop their own local campaigns, and the coordinating body will focus its efforts on developing a national message for the candidates. UCP, BPC, and BSDP leaders expressed hoped the UDF PC (read Milinkevich and BPF) would stop doing nothing⁸ and support the coordinating body's work. Milinkevich has not strengthened his case by a taking a protracted vacation and by meeting EU leaders on his own.

-- Second Democratic Congress. Milinkevich and the BPF do not believe a second congress is necessary, arguing that such an undertaking would be a waste of time and money.

Ivashkevich and other BPF leaders add that the UCP and BPC are only interested in removing Milinkevich from his position as UDF leader and view a second congress as the ideal mechanism for realizing their primary objective. UCP and BPC leaders argue that a second congress is needed to define the priorities of the UDF in the post-presidential election period. (Note: The first such congress, held in October 2005, selected Milinkevich as the presidential candidate of the unified opposition. At the time, Milinkevich rejected the idea that the congress would choose a long-term leader of the opposition, although he has subsequently sought to take on that role. End Note.) The UCP and BPC are willing to wait until after the municipal elections to hold a second congress but refuse to recognize Milinkevich as the legitimate leader of the opposition coalition. When Ivashkevich and leaders of the UCP, BPC, and BSDP recently worked out an arrangement to allow candidates for the municipal elections to serve as delegates to the second congress, Milinkevich, BPF, and NGO representatives on the UDF rejected the proposal, claiming that a congress was unnecessary and the NGO community had not been adequately consulted.

-- Role of UDF PC. Milinkevich and BPF are in favor of keeping the current formation of the PC, which includes the heads of large and small political parties (excluding Kozulin,s BSDP) and NGO representatives. The UCP, BPC, BSDP, and BPL are in favor of eliminating the small parties from the PC, as they represent only a few people, and formally inviting BSDP to the PC. The UCP and BPC repeatedly complain that the small parties lack the financial and human resources to merit seats at the table. Although UCP,s Shinkarik was reluctant to admit it, the UCP is particularly interested in restructuring the PC in an effort to strip Milinkevich and the BPF of their support on the PC.

-- Role of UDF Secretariat. When asked why some opposition parties created a coordinating body for the elections when the UDF had already established the UDF Secretariat for this same purpose (ref D), Shinkarik and BPC,s Ukhnyalov maintained that their parties never officially agreed that the Secretariat would handle such tasks. Furthermore, UCP, BPC, and the BPL do not recognize the current head of the Secretariat, BPF,s Ivashkevich, given his unsuitability as a representative of all parties within the UDF. UCP, BPC, and BPL insist that someone like BPL leader Bukhvostov, who organized the UDF,s October 2005 congress, should be designated the leader of the Secretariat. Until Milinkevich and the BPF concede to this demand, the

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other main parties within the UDF and the BSDP will develop plans for the local elections independently of the UDF. BSDP,s Lavkovich added that his party is not a member of the UDF and thus it was only logical that his party formed a separate partnership with interested parties ahead of the municipal elections.

-- Russia vs. West Orientation. Ivashkevich and the BPF claim that a pro-Moscow block is developing within the UDF and BPC and BSDP are leading the initiative. Although BPC,s Kalyakin has never denied the view that a center-leftist wing of the UDF is necessary to spark Russian interest in the coalition, BPF now claims that Moscow officials and businessmen are providing political and financial support for the creation of a pro-Moscow opposition coalition. According to Ivashkevich, the recent establishment of the independent coordinating body for the local elections by UCP, BPC, BSDP, and BPL confirms the development of such a block. When asked if this was true, UCP, BPC, and BSDP leaders flatly denied the rumor, but noted that it would be a good thing if it were true. Lavkovich added that Milinkevich is too pro-West for the Belarusian electorate and that while Western support for the opposition is essential, Russian support is equally important. (Note: UCP is ideologically opposed to Moscow,s influence in opposition activities, but Ivashkevich

suggested that Lebedko was forced to make such a deal in his bid to eventually become the coalition leader. End Note.)

But All Is Not Lost

17. (C) Despite these clear and growing sources of tension in the coalition, the UDF leadership still agrees on at least three issues.

-- Lukashenko Is Enemy Number One. All UDF members and the BSDP assert they remain united by their common desire to remove Lukashenko from power and set up a democratic government. To their credit, the parties have gone to great lengths to keep their public accusations against each other to a minimum and have focused most of their public statements on GOB repression and the need for change.

-- UDF Is A Necessary Entity. Although UCP, BPC, and BPL are increasingly working outside the framework of the UDF, these parties stress that the UDF has at least retained its symbolic value. Belarusians and the international community must believe that the democratic forces are working together, and the UDF serves this purpose. UCP Shinkarik added that the state of the coalition is bad, but he doubts it will get any worse.

-- Coordination At Regional Level Still Strong. Most national party leaders admit and our frequent trips to the regions confirm that while the national party leaders have reached an impasse, the regional party leaders largely remain focused on the task at hand) i.e., coordinating campaign activities ahead of the municipal elections. Party and NGO leaders in the nearby city of Borisov, for example, demonstrated a high degree of cooperation and claimed they pay little attention to the drama unfolding in Minsk, even though Borisov is only 60 miles outside of Minsk (ref E).

Our Observations And Preliminary Recommendations

18. (C) Unfortunately, as an agent of change, the UDF in the post-presidential election period has struggled to maintain the attention and interest of the broader pro-democratic forces. Despite his reassuring words to international observers (ref F), Milinkevich has proven incapable of maintaining unity in the coalition. UDF leaders Kalyakin and Lebedko have been unable to convince Milinkevich and the BPF to make concessions on restructuring the PC, and thus have begun to develop more formal partnerships with a coalition of the willing, including Kozulin, BSDP. That said, disgruntled political parties will not likely abandon the UDF, if only for tactical reasons. Moreover, the parties remain interested in fielding candidates for the municipal elections. BPF, for example, took advantage of the September 16 & Jeans Fest (ref G) to recruit 400 non-party youth activists for the municipal elections.

19. (C) Accordingly, the USG and EU should continue to encourage the UDF members to work together. However, if they refuse, our bottom line should be that the parties and NGOs -- separately or collectively -- remain focused on broadening the base of support for democratic change. Moreover, regional party leaders have demonstrated more readiness to

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lay aside partisan and personal differences and build effective partnerships with other parties and NGOs than their national counterparts. The USG should consider providing greater support to the parties at the regional level. Finally, although it is not for the USG to take a position on a personnel matter, the UCP,s and BPC,s insistence on replacing Ivashkevich with Bukhvostov is not a bad idea. Bukhvostov proved to be a very capable leader in maintaining unity among opposition parties and NGOs in the lead up to the congress. We will provide further input on ways to provide

maximum support to a struggling coalition in a separate
message.
Stewart